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ABSTRACT

A survey of adult continuing education needs and preferences under the sponsorship of the Division of Continuing Education, New York Education Department, was completed by a total of 20,486 upstate New York adults, excluding New York City. The survey instrument was designed to obtain information from adults (all persons sixteen or older who were not currently full-time students) in personal interviews and focused on six major areas: (1) background information on the adults surveyed, (2) past participation in continuing education activities, (3) expressed learning interests, (4) obstacles to participation in continuing education activities, (5) preferred conditions for participation in continuing education, and (6) potential for utilization of counseling and advising services for adults. The interview data were analyzed for the entire sample and for various subgroups, regions, and local communities. Approximately 94% of the respondents identified one or more subjects of personal interest, with half of these adults naming five or more topics of interest. The respondent selected a first-choice learning interest as well as naming all topics which held some interest for him or her. (Ten tables included in this paper summarize the findings in the six major survey areas by the variables of sex, age, and educational background.) (VB)

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ASSESSING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF NEW YORK STATE ADULTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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Planning and administering continuing education programs is a task which is rapidly becoming more complex. The field of continuing education has been growing rapidly to meet the needs of increased numbers of adults participating in educational activities. A survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics provides documentation that total participants in learning activities increased from 13 to 17 million adults between 1969 and 1975. This trend toward greater utilization of educational services is accompanied by other evidence that program administration is complicated by the variety of funding sources, sponsorship patterns, program types and decentralization of program responsibilities.

Although the dramatic growth in the ranks of adult learners attests to considerable success on the part of providers in meeting adult learning needs, the operation, improvement and extension of such continuing education services depends upon a two-way exchange of information between the learners and those associated with planning and providing adult learning activities. This flow of knowledge and information involves such factors as the potential learner's awareness of his own educational needs and preferences and the existence of appropriate learning activities for the satisfaction of these needs. Similarly, continuing education providers require current and detailed information about client needs and wants in order to make program and policy decisions; they also must bring present and proposed program offerings to the attention of the potential learner. In this process, the flow of information is an essential link in facilitating the actions and decisions of learners and providers of continuing education services. Nevertheless, few program administrators have sufficient time or resources available to conduct in-depth research on community needs, consequently, they may be forced to make decisions about continuing education programming without complete information about their present or potential clientele.

Concern for this need for comprehensive information about the learning preferences of adults and the extent to which these needs were being met led to the development of the present study under sponsorship of the Division of Continuing Education, New York State Education Department - an effort directed to supplying improved information for continuing education planning. The study consists of a three-part data collection effort: 1) the assessment of the continuing education needs of New York State adults,

2) an examination of the present delivery system for continuing education in the state, and 3) an assessment of the in-service training needs of continuing education faculty and administrators. However, this paper primarily describes findings from the survey of adult continuing education needs and preferences.

Objectives of the Study

The basic objectives of the study were:

1. To identify the continuing education needs and barriers to participation of adults in New York State (excluding New York City).
2. To collect information concerning the educational services offered to adults in programs sponsored by the public schools, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services and two-year colleges in New York State.
3. To identify the staff development priorities of continuing education administrators and faculties in the public schools, BOCES and two-year colleges in the state.
4. To utilize the information obtained as a basis for regional and state decision-making and planning concerning program development and staff training in continuing education.

Survey Method

In the Fall of 1975, a survey instrument to obtain information from adults about their perceived learning needs was developed and field tested by staff of the Institute for Research and Development in Occupational and Continuing Education at Cornell University. The instrument was designed to obtain information from adults in personal interviews covering the following major areas.

1. Background information on the adults surveyed.
2. Past participation in continuing education activities.
3. Expressed learning interests.
4. Obstacles to participation in continuing education activities.
5. Preferred conditions for participation in continuing education.
6. Potential for utilization of counseling and advising services for adults.

The questions based on each of these areas were constructed in a multiple choice format with answers recorded on a machine-scorable form. The majority of these questions had precoded response categories with responses such as "other" or "don't know" included to provide for answers not specified among the choices. In addition, interviewers could record other comments or special information from the survey participant on an interviewer summary sheet. This method was considered to be the most efficient way of handling the vast amount of survey data while permitting the recording of special circumstances among the very large sample population.

The resulting survey questionnaire was field-tested with adults of various ages and educational backgrounds. It was then subjected to special review by professionals in the field of continuing education. Following the field test and review, the preliminary questionnaire was revised and the final version prepared for administration to survey participants. The length of the average interview was approximately one-half hour.

Since an important objective of the needs assessment study was to obtain data about continuing education needs for local area planning, the survey questionnaire was administered in local communities throughout the state. The State Education Department regional structure (nine regions) was employed to divide the state for purposes of the survey. For each region, a regional manager or survey coordinator was selected to supervise the administration of the survey in that region. These persons were selected according to several criteria. The managers were (1) recommended by the regional supervisor; (2) one of the perceived leaders in adult and continuing education in the area; and (3) persons with full-time or major responsibility in the field of adult and continuing education in their educational institution. The regional managers were aided in the task by other continuing education professionals who made up a regional cabinet. The resulting team was responsible for selection and training of interviewers, distribution and collection of materials, carrying out the sampling plan as well as other administrative duties associated with the survey.

The Sample of Adults

For this survey of continuing education needs, the population of interest was identified by the State Education Department as all persons age 16 or older who were not currently full-time students. Each school supervisory district throughout the state was instructed in methods of randomly selecting 700 of its adult residents to be interviewed. It was suggested that the total number of interviews be apportioned in clusters of five interviews per neighborhood to facilitate the use of interviewer time. Since the project had special interest in the responses of under-educated adults, interviewers were instructed to use special efforts in their attempts to obtain responses to the questionnaire. In several areas with large non-English-speaking populations, the use of bilingual interviewers enabled these residents to be surveyed.

The resulting sample included a total of 20,486 New York State adults, excluding New York City. Consequently, the obtained data reflect a sample drawn from a population base of 10,342,084 upstate New York residents (1970 Census). Of this total, 5,843,416 persons were age 25 and over (57% of the upstate population) and could be expected to constitute a potential audience for continuing education services.

Findings

The interview data were analyzed for the entire sample and for various subgroups, regions and local communities. Special emphasis was given to the identification of trends and providing information for planning services. In general, most adults indicated an interest in learning. Approximately 94% of the respondents identified one or more subjects of personal interest with half of these adults naming five or more topics of interest. Only 6% did not name an interest.

The respondent selected a first-choice learning interest as well as naming all topics which held some interest for him or her. The ten top-ranked interests are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Top-Ranked Learning Interests of Adults

(N=20,486)

First-Choice Interest	N	% of Resp.	Interest Selected Among Others	N	% of Resp.
1. Arts and Crafts	1550	7.6	1. Arts and Crafts	6798	33.0
2. Business Skills	1101	5.4	2. Physical Fitness	5640	27.5
3. Building Trades	867	4.3	3. Sports and Games	5421	26.5
4. Nursing	780	3.8	4. Home Decorating	4986	24.3
5. High School Equivalency	775	3.8	5. Gardening	4790	23.4
6. Industrial, Technical Skills	767	3.7	6. Sewing	4656	22.7
7. Sewing	699	3.4	7. Business Skills	4196	20.5
8. Psychology, Human Behavior	660	3.2	8. Cooking	4047	19.8
9.5 Home Repairs	601	2.9	9. Travel	4024	19.6
9.5 Sports and Games	601	2.9	10. Psychology, Human Behavior	3959	19.3

These lists of learning interests based on the entire sample show the heavy influence of avocational interests or learning for personal enjoyment purposes. Most adults included one or more such topics among their expressed choices. Older adults, in particular, constituted a group with strong interest in personal development learning. However, interest in learning for job-related reasons was almost as strong a motive for study. Almost as many respondents said that their first-choice interest was related to present or future employment (48.1%) as for other non-job-related reasons (51.9%).

Respondents who said they did have a job-related reason for wanting to study their first-choice subject were then asked how the subject was related to their work. Most stated that they wished to learn skills to advance in their work (41.7%) or to get a new job (40.2%). The smallest proportion said the reason was to meet requirements of their employer or profession (18.1%).

There was a noticeable correlation between educational level and respondents' choice of a course for job-related reasons. Individuals with less formal education were more likely to cite a job-related reason for study than respondents with a college degree or post-graduate education. See Table 2.

Table 2

Respondents With Job-Related First-Choice Interest by Educational Level

	%[a]
No formal education	45.1
8 years or fewer	45.7
Some High School	52.4
High School Diploma or G.E.D.	44.9
Business or Trade School	37.8
Some College	44.3
College Degree or More	30.1

[a]Based on proportion of respondents at each educational level.

A similar trend was noted when job-relatedness of interest was compared with level of family income. For those with family income of $35,000 and over, only 27.0% wanted a course for a job-related reason, compared to 59.2% of those with a family income of less than $2,000. It appears that the majority of those with lower education and lower income viewed continuing education as an avenue or means for improving job-related skills and knowledge. Conversely, the majority of those with higher education and income wanted continuing education for avocational reasons.

The choices and reasons cited by adults in making their selections of learning interests differed according to the individual's life situation or special characteristics as a potential learner. The individual's age, sex, educational level were influential in differentiating interests and conditions under which the respondent preferred to study. For example, persons under age 25 had the greatest desire for credit, diplomas or other formal recognition; persons in the younger age groups also showed a greater preference for a series of courses or other long-term educational programs. Older persons, whose interests were more avocational in nature, generally preferred a single course and expressed little desire for credit in comparison to other age groups.

The men and women in the survey sample differed in their expressed learning interests. Tables 3 and 4 list the ten subjects of learning interest most frequently chosen by each sex. The left hand column of each table lists the subjects which were of greatest interest ("first-choice") to respondents. The right hand column lists the subjects which were chosen most frequently by all respondents of each sex (subjects considered to be of general interest to respondents).

Table 3

Learning Interests by Sex of Respondents: Males (N=7870)

First-Choice Subjects	% Resp.	Subjects Chosen Among Others	% Resp.
1. Building Trades	10.0	1. Building Trades	35.1
2. Industrial, Technical Skills	8.5	2. Industrial, Technical Skills	30.9
3. Home Repairs	5.7	3. Home Repairs	30.1
4.5 Sports and Games	4.0	4. Sports and Games	29.5
4.5 Driving, Flight Training	4.0	5. Physical Fitness	24.6
6. Management Skills	3.8	6. Driving, Flight Training	22.5
7. High School Equivalency	3.6	7. Arts and Crafts	19.1
8. Arts and Crafts	3.5	8. Investment	17.9
9. Engineering	2.9	9. Law	17.6
10. Physical Fitness	2.5	10. Management Skills	17.3

Table 4

Learning Interests by Sex of Respondents: Females (N=12,000)

First-Choice Subjects	% Resp.	Subjects Chosen Among Others	% Resp.
1. Arts and Crafts	10.4	1. Arts and Crafts	43.0
2. Business Skills	7.6	2.5 Home Decorating	36.8
3. Nursing	6.0	2.5 Sewing	36.8
4. Sewing	5.3	4. Physical Fitness	30.0
5. Home Decorating	4.3	5. Gardening	28.5
6. Psychology, Human Behavior	4.1	6. Cooking	27.5
7. High School Equivalency	3.9	7. Business Skills	27.0
8. Travel	3.0	8. Sports and Games	25.1
9. Cooking	2.7	9. Travel	22.8
10. Performing Arts	2.6	10. Performing Arts	19.6

The learning interests of the men and women interviewed followed traditional sex-stereotyped lines. The males selected building trades, industrial and technical skills and home repairs among their top interests, while the women selected arts and crafts, business skills and nursing as their learning priorities. However, women tended to select more subjects of interest than the men in the sample. Slightly over one-third of the women (36.3%) listed seven or more leading interests, compared to one-fourth of the men (26.6%).

The responses of men and women were remarkably similar on such aspects of continuing education study as the total length of a course or desirability of taking a college-level course. Both males and females (49.4% of the total sample) indicated that their main preference was for a period of study from one to four months, a period encompassing the traditional academic semester. In addition, about one-fourth (26.4%) of the total sample felt that it would be important for them to study at college level, while 37.4% of the sample wanted to study for a license, diploma or degree. Of these latter respondents, slightly more males (39.8%) than females (35.7%) would desire this form of recognition.

However, women whose learning interests were job-related (55.9% of women interviewed) differed strongly from the rest of the women in their choice of subjects for study. Table 5 lists the ten subjects of learning interest most frequently chosen by the sub-sample of women with job-related reasons for study. The left hand column lists the subjects which were most interesting ("first-choice") to respondents. The center column gives the rank order for these same subjects as they were selected by all women in the sample. The right hand column lists the subjects which were chosen most frequently among all subjects, by the sub-sample of women with job-related reasons for study.

A comparison of the lists of learning interests shows that this group of women share many of the interests of the rest of the women in Arts and Crafts, Sewing and Home Decorating. However, their first-choice interests were considerably more likely to be subjects related to skill training or technically-oriented subject matter.

Table 5

Learning Interests of Women With Job-Related Reasons for Study (N=4831)

First-Choice Subjects	% Resp.	Rank of First-Choice Interest for All Women	Subjects Chosen Among Others	% Resp.
1. Business Skills	15.0	2	1. Business Skills	38.4
2. Nursing	11.9	3	2. Arts and Crafts	35.8
3. H.S. Equivalency	6.9	7	3. Sewing	34.7
4. Education	5.1	11	4. Home Decorating	34.6
5. Psychology, Human Behavior	4.9	6	5. Physical Fitness	30.4
6. Computer Science	4.1	16	6. Psychology, Human Behavior	27.5
7. Arts and Crafts	3.9	1	7. Cooking	25.3
8.5 Management Skills	3.3	20	8. Nursing	24.7
8.5 Sewing	3.3	4	9. Sports and Games	23.8
10. Home Decorating	2.8	5	10. Gardening	23.1

Barriers to Participation in Continuing Education

As part of the interview process, respondents were questioned about the obstacles to their participation in continuing education. A list of twenty-one potential barriers was presented and each respondent was asked first to identify "any of these (reasons) keeping you from taking courses in the subject you are interested in," and, second, to identify "which one of these is the most important reason keeping you from taking a course."

Less than one-fifth (18.4%) of the sample reported no barriers to their participation in continuing education. Since 66.6% of the respondents had reported some participation in continuing education after completing their formal schooling, it is clear that many of the perceived barriers had not kept these adults from participation. More likely, given the broad range and number of interests cited by adults, while these barriers may have kept some adults from any type of participation in continuing education, other adults feel that they have not been able to participate as much as they would have desired.

Table 6

Most Frequently Identified Barriers to Participation

Total Sample (N=20,486)

Most Important Barrier	%	Barrier Chosen Among Others	%
Home Responsibilities	12.1	Home Responsibilities	30.7
Cost of Tuition	9.5	Class Schedule Inconvenient	30.6
Class Schedule Inconvenient	8.7	Cost of Tuition	25.0
No Class Offered	8.5	No Class Offered	24.0
Job Responsibilities	6.1	Job Responsibilities	19.3
Too far away, no transportation	4.1	Lack of Information	18.3

Sex of Respondent: Males (N=7870)

Most Important Barrier	%	Barrier Chosen Among Others	%
Class Schedule Inconvenient	9.3	Class Schedule Inconvenient	30.5
Job Responsibilities	9.2	Job Responsibilities	26.3
Cost of Tuition	9.1	No Class Offered	24.7
No Class Offered	9.0	Home, Other Responsibilities	23.7
Home, Other Responsibilities	7.5	Cost of Tuition	23.2
Lack of Information	4.3	Lack of Information	19.9

Sex of Respondent: Females (N=12,000)

Most Important Barrier	%	Barrier Chosen Among Others	%
Home, Other Responsibilities	15.4	Home, Other Responsibilities	36.0
Cost of Tuition	9.9	Class Schedule Inconvenient	31.0
Class Schedule Inconvenient	8.4	Cost of Tuition	26.5
No Class Offered	8.2	No Class Offered	23.9
Need for Baby Sitter	4.7	Need for Baby Sitter	17.8
Too far away, no transportation	4.5	Lack of Information	17.7

"Home Responsibilities" was the barrier selected most frequently by the total adult sample, both as a general barrier and as the most important barrier. Although this barrier was the greatest hindrance to most people, it is the one which cannot be remedied as easily by those who plan continuing education programs. The next three barriers identified, however, are ones over which continuing educators have more control, namely, cost of tuition, inconvenient class schedule, and lack of class offerings. See Table 6.

For men and women, although four of the top six barriers selected as "most important" by the respondents are the same, their ranking differs along sex-stereotyped lines. For women, home responsibilities was listed as the chief barrier to continuing education participation while for men, it ranked fifth. Similarly, for the males, "job responsibilities" was the second ranked barrier. For women, although job responsiblities did not appear among the top six barriers, a different barrier "need for baby sitter or child care" was included.

As previously seen with learning interests, perceived barriers to participation in continuing education also varied with such characteristics as age, income and educational levels of the respondents. Cost of tuition was the top-ranked barrier for those with less than a high school education as well as for those age 25 or under. The barrier "feels too old" was seen as the chief obstacle by adults age 55 and over.

Information and Counseling

Since individuals may have need of special services to help them take advantage of the various learning opportunities, several interview questions were included in this survey to determine the personal perceptions and opinions of adults about counseling and information services.

The survey findings indicate that 47.0% of all adults interviewed felt that they did not have enough information about continuing education courses in their local communities. Another 41.1% felt they did have sufficient information and 11.5% did not have an opinion about the amount of information available to them. Individuals with job-related learning interests were slightly above the average (50.4%) in expressing the feeling that they did not have enough information.

Generally, respondents preferred mailed notices as the best way to receive information about continuing education activities. Although approximately one-half (40.1%) of all respondents selected this method, there were noticeable differences in the proportion of adults in various sub-samples who expressed this same preference (see Table 7). Full-time homemakers were particularly high in their preference for direct mail; in contrast, persons with 8 or fewer years of formal education were considerably lower than the average on this choice although higher on use of information centers and radio and TV.

Respondents were generally positive about the usefulness of some type of counseling to advise individuals about continuing education courses and services. Over two-thirds of the respondents felt that such a counseling service would help them to some extent (see Table 8). This response rate was even higher among sub-groups such as persons with job-related learning interests and those with lower incomes and educational levels. Among respondents whose main learning interest was job related, 80.0% felt that a counseling service would be very or somewhat helpful; this feeling was shared by 80.1% of respondents with family incomes of less than $5,000 per year and 79.1% of adults with less formal education than a high school diploma.

Table 8

Respondents' Perception of the Helpfulness of Continuing Education Counseling

	Total Sample	
	N	%
Very helpful	6724	37.2
Somewhat helpful	5926	32.8
Not very helpful	2628	14.6
Not at all helpful	2779	15.4
Total	18057	100.0

Conclusions and Implications

Meeting the specific learning needs of a particular adult in a community is a difficult task. Adults have diverse characteristics and consequently, have different perceptions of what they wish to learn as well as different opinions on when, why and how they want to learn it. Assuming that a desired learning activity is available, whether or not an adult can participate in the activity may depend upon a host of other

Table 7

Best Method for Respondents to Obtain Continuing Education Information: Selected Characteristics

Best Means of Information	Total (N=19,090) %	Educational Level: 8 Years or Less (N=1682) %	Some High School (N=3692) %	H. S. Diploma or GED (N=5619) %	Business or Trade School (N=1309) %	Some College (N=3194) %	College Degree or More (N=3011) %
Newspapers	18.7	18.4	19.4	19.0	21.9	17.9	17.6
Catalogs or Bulletins	11.5	13.2	9.4	10.1	8.5	13.8	14.2
Radio or Television	6.7	17.3	9.3	5.8	5.2	4.1	3.2
Mailed Notices	50.1	34.7	44.7	52.2	52.5	53.8	56.2
Information Center	8.2	10.5	11.3	8.3	7.9	6.9	5.0
Place of Work	3.3	3.2	3.7	3.6	3.1	2.7	3.3
Other	1.3	2.6	2.2	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.5

Best Means of Information	Sex: Male (N-7330) %	Female (N=11,337) %	Age: Under 25 Years (N=3799) %	55 Years or More (N=2178) %	Previous Participants: All Previous Participants (N=13096) %	Full-Time Homemakers (N=2470) %	Non-Participants (N=5457) %
Newspapers	19.2	18.4	14.7	21.4	18.5	17.9	19.4
Catalogs or Bulletins	11.4	11.0	12.0	10.5	11.6	10.2	10.7
Radio or Television	8.3	5.6	8.5	6.7	5.0	3.9	10.2
Mailed Notices	45.9	53.4	46.5	52.9	52.4	60.2	46.4
Information Center	8.4	7.9	12.5	4.2	8.1	6.7	8.3
Place of Work	4.7	2.5	3.6	2.4	3.4	0.4	3.0
Other	1.4	1.2	2.4	1.8	0.9	0.7	1.9

factors such as when and where the course is offered, cost, motivation, home and family responsibilities as well as other barriers. However, since individuals may share similar learning needs with others of like age, sex, educational background or other common characteristics, some indication of service needs may be gained from the responses of such potential adult learners.

The findings from the survey of adult continuing education learning preferences point to the necessity for flexible programs which can adapt to individual needs and the needs of special target populations. Consideration of such needs raises the further problem of additional expense incurred in providing such flexibility, in addressing programs to the needs of special sub-groups and in offering the special information, referral and counseling services desired by adult learners. This is particularly critical since although some state and federal funds are available to provide programming for special groups, the present continuing education system in New York State is largely self-supporting. Since cost of tuition is already one of the most highly ranked barriers to participation for all adult groups and the top-ranked barrier for lower income adults, increases in the costs of participation in learning activities may have adverse effects upon enrollments. Special attention to the problem of financing continuing education is required in order to find solution which can meet the diverse needs of adult students.

In general, the data gathered in these interviews with over 20,000 adults in New York State form an information base for planning services for continuing education learners at both state and regional levels. Such information is a necessary first step in attempting to meet the needs of adults for basic occupational skills, job upgrading and retraining, as well as responding to the rising demands for a variety of educational services.